

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/2

Tom Sheehan

Tools' First Disciple

December gave us both a gray day,
thick as hardpan, sitting-down thick,
a neutral sadness running pole to pole,
a day that cried for work or laughter.

Work wins out, I told son James,
barely three and barely to my thigh.
I dressed him for the full adventure;
gloves soft as strung rabbit's neck,

stocking cap puffed out of lamb,
jacket thick with duck's outside,
a twist of blue knotting under chin,
two-ply boots denser than a tire.

Jamie leaned penguin-ish, starchy tight,
not quite sure of feet or balance point,
where the fulcrum of his day angled,
what could tip him this way or that.

I sat him, nugget of a boy, deep in the van
among chainsaw, rip ax, six-pound maul,
and the pair of blunt wedges I had worn
feverishly down through reams of trees.

Oh, James likes iron; it calls attention
to itself, hidden core ringing at his feet,
hard touch remembered on cold days,
surface demanding sweat of hands.

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He likes iron forcing ways through,
iron beating on or back brittle echoes,
that sprouts handles, oddest points
and sharp edges; iron changing shapes

Of shapes, moving together or apart,
iron crying for sweet will of muscle.
James is bound to move earth,
carve pieces to wanting, his need.

Magnetic he comes. Tools move to him,
are drawn by his hands, deep heart's thirst,
shoulder coming poised behind the ingot,
tense shaking little boys radiate.

Some monger's fire simmers in his eyes;
his lungs have bellow burst, puff of dream.
A dynamo hums in him, sings, trembles
down the limbs he brings to huge tasks,

a flywheel set in motion, gearing's grab.
He clanged and banged and rang aloud
in the back of the van, echoing himself
among harsh tools, rang hard as them,

wavered as a tuning fork to day's wand
gave me in the driver's seat fair music
of the shop, beat of the forge at fire,
early shape of man in the ringing light

of coming on to size, pig iron breakout
from the harvest of heat, furnace essence,
the brazier soul coming through a sense
of fire, son where wrought welding works.

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Oh, we bend here in a parade of tasks,
endless marching to orders we are born
ever to obey, the expense of our energies.
Each of us must light his own ample fire,

as James must light his. Failure is here,
not burning off the energy, not using up
all the waiting ghost that resides within.
Now James, my son, comes beside me

moving up in time, rattling with tools
he will spend his life with or always at,
the promise of something Excalibured,
the deeply driven driven out or drawn.

The hunger swell that swells some souls
must swell in him. At length he will move
the mountain in the way, will bend keen
tool edge on the steepest edge of Earth

as he moves Authurian in his life. But then
we came at last to dream and destination;
a wide field, a thick butt of maple tree,
monarch dropped along wide avenue,

once the carrier of a hundred fallen nests,
donned a thousand rains, worst of storms,
wore scars of lightning zippered on its bark.
Into this field was brought tree's death.

And we come, James and I, to scavenge,
to pick as ants, gulls, high-guide vultures
what is left of the dying or the dead;
a father and son looting what is left

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of the maple's being, faint yellow core.
A pair of deed-takers, two men of tools,
making hard music of twin cutters
as I whipped my saw into quick frenzy.

It loves good wood, slab of thick hides,
the inner rings hundreds high and counting.
James held his ground, the maul too heavy
to lift but handle operable as rudder stick,

able to steer the day to someplace else.
His eyes measured all three feet down
into the butt the saw's cut would hasten,
blinked at the majestic toss of sawdust

and chips hosing out beneath rapid chain,
figuring what it takes to earn saw's rights,
how much tool it was, what its sound meant
in a field where our maple died some more.

Once upon a Timely Moment
(there's always a form to assess, assist. become.)

Apprehensive, she pushed open the door to take a final look, to check the Earth as far as she could see, to measure, to see if the gods she held were less than perfect. This was her world. The terror she found was in the measurement, in the time she had spent exploring dividend possibilities, the market's surge, a late movie thought more boisterous than life itself, someone's divorce, chicanery and outright theft, and an election all too soon winked at. It came at her, the swift thought: our feet are caught in place: we are sucked into loam and hardpan and left for all of this rock; we are locked up tighter than the grip of stable Earth's 17-degree axis. Escape is not here, or atonement for us. She kept saying "we," kept herself aligned in that rare and human confederacy. There was assessment and agreement not known about; at that moment, in one half-held breath, hoe in hand, eyes gone to marble, a gaunt Filipino suddenly apprehends a minor shift in the Earth's crust. It is the awed way she would know a tilt at a pinball machine. Beyond him, her, momentous Krakatoa, an island yet, proves to be imaginative again at the foot of history, and is no longer breathless. And deeper yet, farther away, thought to be buried out there in the fluffed accountabilities of Time, one long horse-tailed, red-eyed, incommutable comet picks up a little bit of left hand English... just for the hell of it.

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A Boy from My Street

Stretching for everness
to cure a menial ailment,
torch inked-up headlines
cause Earth's out of kilter,
but not his evening lake,
my neighborhood lad
wound his way to war.

Now two streets over
they know his name,
spill it from their lips,
gasp it once, think it's
too far away to count,
an ocean in between,
never sound it again.